

*SBT-AE-007. Song To The Men Of England. Percy Bysshe Shelley Poem.
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Song To The Men Of England. P B Shelley Poem. Appreciation By P S Remesh Chandran

Editor, Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum



By [PSRemeshChandra](#), 18th Mar 2011. Short URL

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A revolutionary is a person who causes constant changes around him wherever he is. In this sense, Shelley was a revolutionary poet. Song To The Men Of England opened up world's eyes to the torture, brutality and exploitation workers were subjected to in England during the time of her colonial prosperity and raised the question: Why can't they revolt? Karl Marx predicted workers' revolution in England as follow up of the Industrial Revolution but it never happened. The English workers were inert.

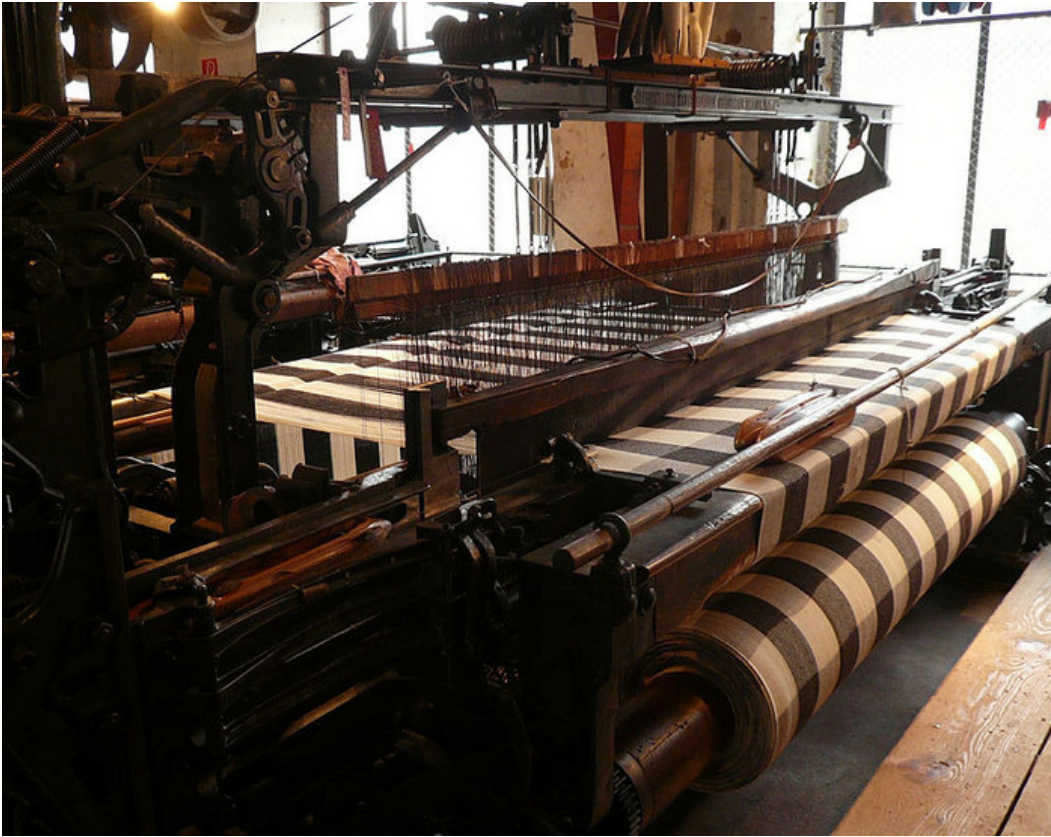
Kill not a bird or beast or man, they are all our brethren.



01. A portrait of Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Percy Bysshe Shelley wrote each poem to celebrate a particular tune as we can see in his poems Song To The Men Of England, Ode To The West Wind, To A Skylark, The Cloud, Adonais and many others. He is considered one of the greatest poets in English and his influence on world literature is immense. When we refer to him as a revolutionary poet, it does not mean he stood for merciless killing. In fact, he considered even animals as our fellow creatures, not to be slain for human food. It was after reading his works that the famous English author and dramatist George Bernard Shaw became a vegetarian.

Workers and exploiters are like bees and drones in bee community



02. A 1939 weaving loom with flying shuttles.

Here in this poem, Shelley asks the Nineteenth Century peasants and workers of England why they are not revolting against the landlords and the industrial production owners who are exploiting them to the last drop of their blood. In the Bee Community, female bees do all the work and the male drones live by exploiting them. Shelley calls the workers Bees and the exploiters Drones which is apt.

Purpose of weapons fails when they are used against man.



03. A 200 single yarn beaming machine of 1907.

Shelley's questions to the workers of England skillfully bring out the pitiful living conditions they live in in England in his times. He is asking them for what reason they plough the fields for the lords who are responsible for their poverty. For what reason, with toil and care, they weave the rich robes their tyrants are wearing, while their own children are shivering in the dark without

cotton or coal. From their birth till their death why the workers feed, clothe and save those ungrateful drones, who in their turn, would either drain their sweat or drink their blood.

Weapons become spoiled when they are stained with their makers' blood.



*04. The celestial forge of Venus and Vulcan.
1641 Oil.*

The Bees of England forge many weapons, chains and scourges which go straight to the hands of the tyrants to be used against them in it's time. Weapons were invented to assist man in his works, but when used against its creator, their purpose fails and they become spoiled. Critics have differed in their interpretations of the word 'spoiled.' A weapon to become spoiled means 'to become stained with its maker's blood'. Knives

were invented for cutting away tree branches from paths of the ancient man in the forests, chains were invented for lifting huge weights from the ground, and whips were designed for taming wild animals. But when they come to be used for throat-cutting, binding men together and for beating man, their purpose fails and they become spoiled.

Sacrificing their lives, making arms and robes and riches for tyrants.



05. Forge arms, in your defense to bear.

The workers pay so high a price by living in constant pain, fear and poverty but even then, in spite of all these sufferings, at least their physical and spiritual needs are not satisfied. If not for fulfilling at least their basic animalistic needs, why should they labour from morning till night and from night till morning again? (Shelley can say this, but there was unbelievable poverty in England. Peasants and workers lived in abject poverty, want and exploitation in the

middle of immense wealth arriving from distant colonies. Just a little food for sustenance and the shade of a shack to rest their heads beneath was all that the workers of England wished in those times). Leisure, comfort and calmness are the spiritual needs of man. Food, shelter and the medicinal treatment of love are the physical needs of man. It is not strange to note that Shelley, unlike most of the other poets in his times, has included love as a physical need of man, like food. The workers sow seed, but the harvest is taken away by lords. They bring wealth out of earth through their work, but the riches are amassed and kept by others. They weave robes for others, but their own children have nothing to wear. The arms they forge also go to the armories of oppressors. Thus Shelley convinces the workers of England and elsewhere that they are exploited to the extreme, and that rising through revolts is the only option before them.

A poet's burning eloquence forcing the doors of England open.



06. Sow seed and reap, but let not the idle heap.

We will normally think the poet, spreading such radical ideas in Colonial England, will finally find his way to London Tower, the English equivalent of the notorious French Bastille. But it was also the era of the Industrial Revolution, immediately following the English version of the Italian Renaissance. No workers' revolution ever occurred in England then or later as Shelley hoped, and Marx had predicted. Communism, the supreme theory of revolution, was born indeed in England's soil, but Carl Marx fuming and storming his head in the British Museum for Thirty two long years came to nothing. Prosperity extinguishes revolutionary traits, whereas poverty inflames them. But England in later years did become a haven and world headquarters for revolutionaries in exile, due to the open door policy there, carved out of passionate poetry and literature by generations of sympathetic *littérateurs*. Shelley's burning eloquence in this song cannot be denied its due share of influence and credit in bringing about this change.

The silent song of weaving winding sheets to graves.



07. Weaving their winding sheet to their graves.

Shelley showed to the workers exploited everywhere in the world that they have a right to rise in revolts. He encourages them to sow seed but let no tyrant reap the harvest; find wealth but let no impostor heap them. But his clarion-calls fell into deaf ears. Seeing the inertness of English workers, towards the end of his poem, Shelley condemns them. By not revolting against their exploiters, they finally will have to shrink to their cells, holes and cellars which are their dwelling places, as the vast halls they constructed and decorated are all possessed by the rich. Imagine a great massive elephant getting melting itself down and disappearing into the tiny pit of a sand-elephant: that is how the proletariat shrinks. The great beast does not know its capabilities. It is a pity to see the workers still wearing the chains they themselves wrought and shaking them. 'The steel ye tempered glance on ye', he writes. 'Glance' here has a dual meaning. He used the word in its both senses- 'slip off from the hand causing a mortal wound', and 'have a quick look at'. The steel the workers themselves tempered is ridiculingly laughing at them! If their destiny goes on unhampered in this way, with plough and spade and hoe and loom- the tools of their trade- they will be continuing to build their tomb and weave their winding-sheet till their beautiful England becomes a vast sepulchre.

Shelley set fire to the conscience of his century.



08. Shelley's poem *To A Skylark* Video Title By Bloom Books Channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFVoiRm-yEI>

Shelley must have been very bold and daring to have published this poem during the peak of England's colonial powers and sovereignty. And he certainly must have been extremely sympathetic and deliquescent in his attitude to workers in his native land. He indeed was a very brilliant poet to have set fire to the conscience of his century. This poem is a masterpiece of poetical eloquence, as well as of political eloquence. It is a brilliant example of commitment and involvement in flames, in action.

Thousands and thousands of workers and peasants succumbed to poverty and mortal illnesses in Shelly's days in England. Not many poets in his times cared to write about these misfortune-struck people. And he too wrote not many poems of this kind about them. Perhaps he might have conceived that 'the present turbulence in his times might be inimical to the fine achievements of mankind so far and become a hindrance to drastic changes in future'. That might have been why he decided to bless his land with a poem which would open everyone's eyes to a world problem. It is a perfectly musical poem, with a perfectly balanced rhythm and a captivating tune which came along originally with the song. Actually the song and its tune are inseparable in this poem. Do not anyone be misled by those lazy, dragging and monotonous tunes which we find in many recitations of this song already circulating in the internet and those tuneless and prose-like

utterances propagated by conventional and less imaginary teachers. They want only to exhibit before their listeners and poor students their pompous recitational skills and that impurity we call accent. They did sore injustice to the excellent musical-minded poet Shelley. The original tune of this poem proves that it was accompanied by some kind of rural peasants' dance in some remote hamlet of England. It contains such a simple, light, country tune, with no complications.

Going through Shelley's poems is like a squirrel going through a mountain of gold dust.



09. Shelley's poem Ozymandias Video Title By Bloom Books Channel.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_exxBg5urk0

It would have been a fine spectacle to watch if someone orchestrated and choreographed the Song To The Men of England as a tribute to Shelley. Singing Shelley's songs is like going through a savoury treat delightful to the tongue and the palates. A singer of this song would undergo an experience similar to the one of the squirrel's who went through a mountain of gold dust and found it impossible not to be sprayed with a few golden dust particles.

Percy Bysshe Shelley's life and works during 1792-1817.



10. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

Percy Bysshe Shelley was born in 1792 August 04 in Horsham, England as the first of seven children of the Sir Timothy Shelley, a country squire and baron, and his wife Elizabeth Pilfold Shelley. His father was a British Parliamentarian of the Whigs Party. He began boys' boarding school at Eton College in 1804. After six years' of boarding school studies, he enrolled at University College, Oxford in 1810 where he became indifferent to studies, published 'The Necessity of Atheism' which made his father angry and caused his expulsion from Oxford the next year. He published his first novel 'Zastrozzi' also in that period. In 1811 he ran away with a young student Ms. Harriet Westbrook to Scotland who he soon became tired of. In 1813 he published the long poem Queen Mab and exposed his political views irrespective of his father being a conservative Parliamentarian. In 1814 he eloped again with the daughter of the famous writer and philosopher William Godwin- young Mary Wollstonecraft- to Europe and the next year we see Shelley hiding in London to evade his creditors. During the years from 1815 to 1818, Shelley became close friends with poets Lord Gordon Byron and John Keats, published The Spirit of Solitude in 1816, children were born and died, married the mother of their children Mary, toured Switzerland and came back with the book History of Six Weeks Tour published in 1817, his first wife Harriet took her life by jumping into London river, and his second wife Mary started writing the famous horror novel Frankenstein.

Shelley's life and works during the years 1818-1824.



11. Writer Philosopher William Godwin.

In 1818, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley published Frankenstein, an all time success, Shelley published Ozymandias and The Revolt of Islam, and they travelled to Italy never to return. Song To The Men Of England and The Masque Of Anarchy were written while Shelley was in Florence. In 1820 Shelley wrote the mythological drama Prometheus Unbound, and in 1821 when John Keats died, he wrote the elegy

Adonais. While living in Pisa and Rome, he completed the tragedy *The Cenci*. In 1822 his schooner *Don Juan* caught up in a storm and Shelley died at the age of 29. He was cremated on the beach and his ashes buried in Rome. Sir. Timoti Shelley was still furious over the political and heretical writings of his son and threatened Shelley's wife Mary in 1824 never to publish anymore of his son's works while he lived. He even threatened to stop financial support to her if she did. After many years, in 1839, he reluctantly allowed Mary to publish Shelley's collected poems and essays on the condition that 'it contained no memoirs of his son'. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was an intellectual equal to Shelley in genius and her 'The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe of 1824 stands a monumental work.

Irony in Percy Bysshe Shelley's life.



12. Different editions of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

Left wing activists considered Shelley as 'Red Shelley' but in real life he was a strict vegetarian and against blood sheds of any kind. His words were not final but wavering and often contradictory. He who said in his work *Defense Of Poetry* that 'man's imagination is only a reflection of god's' was expelled from Oxford University for publishing in 1811 'The Necessity of Atheism'. No one cared his non-belief in god was not final and binding. Literary critics pointed out that his views were contradictory and wavering for he became in soul *The Cloud*, *The West Wind*, *The Skylark* and *The Man Of England* all at the same time, synchronizing his mind with the natural elements and nature's creations which were his characters, but these critics of Shelley forgot all the while that he synchronized his soul with his characters beautifully.

Bloom Books Channel has a video of this poem *Song To The Men Of England*.



13. *Song To The Men Of England Video Title.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy6nlrKRH10>

Bloom Books Channel has recitation videos of Song To The Men Of England, Ozymandias and To a Skylark. Their You Tube links are:

Song To The Men Of England:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zy6nlrKRH10>

Ozymandias:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_exxBg5urk0

To a Skylark:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qFVoiRm-yEI>

A primitive prototype rendering of these song were made in a crude tape recorder decades earlier, in 1984. In 2014, home made videos of these songs were released. In 2015, their third versions with comparatively better audios were released. The next versions, it's hoped, would be fully orchestrated. They are free for reuse, and anyone interested in can develop and build on them, till they become fine musical video productions, to help our little learners and their teachers.

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Meet the author: About the author and accessing his other literary works.



Editor of Sahyadri Books & Bloom Books, Trivandrum. Author of several books in English and in Malayalam. And also author of 'Swan, The Intelligent Picture Book'. Edits and owns Bloom Books Channel. Born and brought up in Nanniyode, a little village in the Sahya Mountain Valley in Kerala. Father British Council-trained English Teacher and mother university-educated. Matriculation with High First Class, Pre Degree studies in Science with National Merit Scholarship, discontinued Diploma Studies in Electronics and entered politics. Unmarried and single.

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18th Mar 2011 (#)

Shelley was very bold and daring to have published these lines during the peak of England's colonial powers. And he certainly might have been very sympathetic and delinquent in his attitude to the workers in his native land. He indeed was a very brilliant poet who set fire to the conscience of his century. This poem is a masterpiece of poetical eloquence. Commitment and involvement in flames.



[Rathnashikamani](#)

31st Mar 2011 (#)

I'm inspired by P. B. Shelley also. Thank you for such a wonderful treat as this on Shelley.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

16th Apr 2012 (#)

Singing Shelley is like going through a treat to me, which actually delights my tongue and palates. What happens to me is like becoming the squirrel that went through a mountain of gold dust.



[deepa venkitesh](#)

25th Jun 2011 (#)

Thank you for the insightful article.



[PSRemeshChandra](#)

2nd Aug 2011 (#)

Dear Rathnashikamani, Deeps,

Thousands and thousands of peasants and workers succumbed to poverty and mortal illness in Shelly's days in England. Not many poets of his times cared to write about them. And he wrote not many poems of this genre. It is a perfectly singable song. It has a perfectly balanced rhythm and a captivating tune which came along when he wrote the song. Actually the song and its tune are inseparable. But do not please be misled by any dragging lazy monotonous tunes of recitations that we may occasionally happen to hear in some famous websites. In fact, the original tune to this song proves that it accompanied some kind of peasants' dance. It would be a very fine spectacle if someone orchestrated and choreographed this song as a tribute to Shelley. It contains a very simple, light, country tune.

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